DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 303 837 CS 506 528

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TITLE Joseph Priestley and the Psychology of Style.
PUB DATE Mar 89
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (40th, Seattle, WA, March 16-18, 1988).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Information Analyses (070) -- Historical Materials (060)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Foreign Countries; Imagination; Language Styles; Persuasive Discourse; Philosophy; Psychology; Rhetorical Criticism; *Rhetorical Invention; *Speech Communication
IDENTIFIERS Aesthetics; Discourse Modes; England; Locke (John); Oratory; *Priestley (Joseph); *Rhetorical Theory; Stylistics

ABSTRACT

Joseph Priestley, in his "A Course of Lectures on Oratory and Criticism," developed a psychological theory of style. The "Course" covers three main topics: traditional rhetorical arts of invention, arrangement, and style. Borrowing from the ideas of David Hartley, the association psychologist; Joseph Addison, the aesthetician; and Adam Smith, the moralist--all of whom offer Priestley a psychology of the human mind, Priestley contributed to discussions of style in 18th century rhetoric by synthesizing and expanding upon the thought of the best thinkers of his day and by using Lockean associationism to explain stylistic effects. Priestley's rhetoric is one of the most successful attempts to base a theory of style on association psychology. By doing so, Priestley rejected the classical concepts of high, middle, and low style and replaced them with a theory that emphasized the psychological impact language can have on readers and listeners. Language becomes the medium through which an individual mind can communicate with another, and style becomes the group of techniques writers and speakers use to gain assent, which Priestley conceived of as a psychological process. (RAE)

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Joseph Priestley and the Psychology of Style

Joseph Priestley's 1788 A Course of Lectures on Oratory and Criticism, which collected the lectures on rhetoric that he gave at the Warrington Academy in the early 1760s, falls into three parts. The first two of these cover the traditional rhetorical arts of invention and arrangement. The third, which is the subject of this essay, covers style. Like the rest of Priestley's rhetoric, this third part largely rejects classical discussions of its subject and replaces these discussions with the application of 18th century philosophy, psychology, and aesthetics. In particular, he applies to the discussion of style the basic psychological systems of his time, basing the majority of his approach on Lockean associationism and theories of aesthetics and morality. While this blending of intellectual ingredients lends itself neither to a consistent theory nor a consistent pedagogy of style, it provides us with one of the best discussions of the subject as English intellectuals conceived it during the period. In the space allowed me, I will discuss how Priestley uses three basic ideas current in 18th century psychology: David Hartley's version of association psychology, Joseph Addison's notion of the pleasures of the imagination, and Adam Smith's theory of sympathy.

Perhaps the most important theoretical basis for Priestley's discussion of style comes from the work of David Hartley, an 18th century physician who developed one of that century's most popular theories of psychology. Priestley makes clear his debt to Hartley when he notes in Oratory and Criticism that he accepts Hartley's position that "sensations consist of nothing more than congeries or combinations of ideas and sensations, separately indistinguishable, but which were formally associated either with the idea itself that excites them, or with some other idea, or circumstance, attending to the introduction of them" (72-73). Without some understanding of Hartley's concept of psychology, this passage makes little sense to the modern reader.

Although Hartley was a practicing physician, his primary interest was in philosophy, which at that time included psychology. He published his major work, Observations on Man, in 1749, and Priestley corresponded with Hartley during the last years of the older man's life. Proof that Priestley knew and respected Hartley's theories grows from his publication in 1775 of an abridgement of the Observations.

Hartley was less an innovator than a compiler, a synthesizer, and a popularizer because his work borrows extensively from that of Locke and Hume. From Locke's Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1700), he borrowed the concept of the association of ideas. With Locke, he viewed ideas as being interconnected, sequential, and descriptive of experience rather than innate and predetermined. He fused

Locke's concepts with his own physiological view of the nervous system to explain how complex mental processes, such as imagining, remembering, and reasoning, can be analyzed into clusters or sequences of elementary sense impressions and that a single law of association can explain all psychological acts. One of Hartley's main contributions was that he freed the notion of the association of ideas from Hume's skepticism, placing it instead in a context of religious sentiment and thereby gaining wide acceptance for the idea.

Being a materialist, Hartley attempted to give the association of ideas a physical basis. He asked the question, How do impressions on the senses register perceptions in the mind?, and developed a physiological explanation. He postulated that the "white medullary substance" of the brain, the spinal marrow, and the nerves were the instruments of sensation. When an object acted on the senses, this action caused vibrations of the infinitesimal medullary particles, and these vibrations conveyed sensations to the brain. Repeated sensations leave in the mind vestiges, types, or images of the object, and these vestiges become the simple ideas of sensation that the mind uses to create complex ideas. Once the mind is supplied with ideas, associations can begin. If the mind experiences a set of sensations many times, these sensations develop considerable power and can call forth their corresponding ideas and all other ideas associated or connected with them.

By this way, a single sensation can call forth an entire set of associated ideas. The process works in the opposite direction, too, because regularly occurring sensory vibrations leave in the nerves miniatures of themselves called "vibratiuncles." Complex ideas associated with these vibratiuncles can call them up, causing the person to reexperience a past sensation vividly (Sprague).

Motion or action for Hartley was associated with the physiology of the nervous system. Motor nerves are connected with the brain, and motion results when vibrations pass from the brain along these nerves to the muscles. When stimulated, the muscles act. Motion could be either automatic or voluntary. Automatic motion results when senses enter the mind via vibrations along the nerves to the brain which then sends the vibrations down the motor nerves to muscles. Examples of this kind of motion would be pulling one's hand away from the fire or crying from intense fear. Voluntary motion, on the other hand, results from ideas in the mind and possesses intentionality (Sprague).

Hartley's associationism pervades Priestley's discussion of style, so a full discussion of its influence is impractical. I would, however, like to discuss Priestley's views of concrete versus abstract language as an example of Hartley's influence. Priestley argues that the best way to engage a reader's interest is to use what he calls "sensible images" (84) or concrete details rather than general ideas. The reason for this preference is that we experience

particulars throughout our daily lives. Consequently, following Hartley, Priestley assumed that these particulars, because they are experienced often, develop considerable power and become connected in the mind with a complex web of associations. To appeal to these sensible images, therefore, offers the writer a powerful tool for moving the reader. General ideas, on the other hand, are, according to Priestley, "substitutes" for particulars (84) and therefore lack their immediate power to associate directly ideas and passions. In other words, abstract ideas lack the complex associations built up from daily experience to give them the power to engage the reader. These general terms, Priestley argues, require of the reader "an effort of the imagination" to suggest particular ideas, so writers, Priestley advises, should use particulars as much as possible (84).

A second psychological theory that Priestley uses in his rhetoric is Joseph Addison's notion of the pleasures of the imagination. Developed in a series of essays in the Spectator during 1712, this idea is one of the first attempts to develop an aesthetic theory using Lockean psychology. With Locke, Addison assumed that all ideas enter the mind through the senses, after which they can be manipulated, enlarged, combined, and associated in various ways. This mental action, Addison argues, is pleasurable when one is associating images that have entered the mind from viewing reality (a scene from nature, for instance) or from viewing a work of art. As Addison writes, "the power of retaining,

altering and compounding those images . . . into all the varieties of picture and vision . . . are most agreeable to the imagination" (288). Art, then, leads to "secondary" pleasures of the imagination because the mind naturally enjoys comparing the ideas arising from a work of art, whether it be a statue, a painting, or a description, with the ideas arising from the original objects in realty. Addison therefore assumes that all appreciation of art is predicated on the mind's initial familiarity with reality. To appreciate a description of a mountain, for instance, the person must first be familiar with mountains in general to get pleasure from its reproduction in art. Addison is not, however, a platonist for he does not attribute to the real object a higher imaginative power than the copy of it, for he recognizes that the experience of an artistic rendering of an object can be more powerful and pleasurable than the experience of the original object in reality. Artists can heighten the pleasure that a reader or viewer experiences in two ways. First, they can emphasize parts of the subject that a viewer of reality might not notice, and, second, artists can stimulate the viewer's passions by presenting objects in special ways. For instance, instead of describing an average face, a writer can describe a beautiful one and then gain even more emotional impact by suffusing that face with a pleasant melancholy.

Priestley mentions the pleasures of the imagination throughout his discussion of style, but he expands Addison's

concept in some interesting ways. He uses the concept to explain what he calls the "more delicate sensations" (72) as opposed to the "stronger passions of the human mind" (73). The different between these two mental activities seems to be that the stronger passions are common to all humans while the finer sensations must be learned and cultivated by means of education in the polite arts. Following Lord Kames, Priestley expands Addison's discussion by noting that these refined pleasures of the imagination can enter through both the eye and ear, not just through the eye as Addison had suggested. Priestley also expands upon Addison's argument when he maintains that the pleasures of the imagination cannot be reduced to a single source (129) but are usually the results of complex associations rather than simple ones. Priestley's most important contribution, however, is to apply the notion of the pleasures of the imagination to rhetoric, using it implicitly to distinguish between kinds of audiences. Educated audiences have the education and cultivation to appreciate finer strokes of style while less cultivated or more boorish audiences do not.

The third psychological theory that Priestley borrows from is Adam Smith's concept of sympathy. In his Lectures on Rhetoric and Belle Lettres, delivered at the University of Glasgow in the 1760s and widely circulated in manuscript, Smith argues that speakers and writers must communicate with their audiences by means of sympathy (Moran). As Smith writes,

> When the sentiment of the speaker is expressed in a neat, clear, plain and clever manner, and the passion of the affection he is poss[ess]led of and intends, by sympathy, to communicate to his hearer, is plainly and cleverly hit off, then and then only the expression has all the force and beauty that language can give it. (22-23)

The idea of sympathy would have immediately summoned to the educated 18th century mind Smith's earlier work, The Theory of Moral Sentiments (1759). This word played a seminal role in Smith's popular and influential moral philosophy, which he predicated on the notion that, despite human kind's undeniable selfishness, people establish connections and ties among themselves that grow from a natural sympathy, an umbrella term that covers such concepts as pity, compassion, benevolence, and other kinds of fellow-feeling that form the basis of Smith's moral system.

These feelings of connection, which Smith conceives of as natural to the human condition, grow out of people's abilities to place themselves in the position of another and to imagine what that person is experiencing. As Smith explains in Moral Sentiments,

> When we see a stroke aimed, and just ready to fall upon a leg or arm of another person, we naturally shrink and draw back our own leg or our own arm; and when it does fall, we feel it in some measure, and are hurt by it as well as the sufferer. . . . Persons of delicate fibres

and a weak constitution of body complain, that in looking on the sores and ulcers which are exposed by beggers in the streets, they are apt to feel an itching or uneasy sensation in the corresponding part of their bodies. (4)

Smith's notion of moral identification between people provides his rhetorical theory with a basis for connecting writer and reader. In order to move readers, writers must project through their prose the sentiments that they themselves feel in order to stimulate similar responses in their audience.

Priestley borrows the idea of sympathy from Smith, but he discusses it within the framework of Hartlean associationism. Priestley first notes that sympathy is "natural to the human mind," (109) which suggests that it is an innate tendency or faculty. However, he later rejects the innate hypothesis when he discusses sympathy in terms of the psychology of associationism. He argues, for instance, that humans tend to accept any proposition when presented by a person who holds it in earnest and "believes it himself" (109). The reader sympathizes with the writer's passion and commitment to the argument, and this identification, to use the language of Kenneth Burke, increases the persuasive power of the message. However, without recognizing the contradiction, Priestley goes on to argue that people associate "strong persuasion" and "truth," and this association explains why any strong persuasion will call up

the idea of truth in the reader's mind (109). In other words, the rhetorical effect of an argument does not grow from sympathy in Smith's sense; instead of being natural to human beings, it results from associations in the reader's mind that the writer can use to achieve persuasive ends.

Priestley made two major contributions ~~to~~ discussions of style in 18th century rhetoric. First, he synthesized ideas borrowed from the best thinkers of his century. I have discussed in some detail his borrowings from Hartley, Addison, and Smith, but Priestley mentions many names throughout Oratory and Criticism, including Alexander Gerard, Lord Kames, David Hume, and Francis Hutcheson, to mention just a few. This tendency to cite sources points to the book's beginning as a set of lectures whose purpose was in part to introduce his Warrington students to the best thinkers of contemporary culture. While Priestely does not always succeed in integrating these various ideas into a coherent argument, he does demonstrate one attempt to make sense of his intellectual milieu. Second, Priestley's rhetoric is one of the most successful attempts to base a theory of style on association psychology. By doing so, Priestley rejected the classical concepts of high, middle, and low style and replaced them with a theory that emphasized the psychological impact language can have on readers and listeners. Language becomes the medium through which one individual mind can communicate with another, and style becomes the group of techniques writers and speakers use to

gain assent, which Priestley conceived of as a psychological process.

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that Joseph Priestley, in his A Course of Lectures on Oratory and Criticism, develops a psychological theory of style. To accomplish this, he borrows from the ideas of David Hartley, the association psychologist; Joseph Addison, the aesthetician; and Adam Smith, the moralalist--all of whom offer Priestley a psychology of the human mind. Priestley contributed to discussions of style in 18th century rhetoric by synthesizing the thought of the best thinkers of his day and by using associationism to explain stylistic effects.